

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE OF GLOBAL SOCIETY – A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE EU

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ABSTRACT: *The value of education in the contemporary landscape of global society - a sociological perspective in the EU.*

What is the value of education in society? In general, if we were to ask about this question, the majority of the answers would probably indicate that we all value education, we attach importance to it, considering it to be responsible for the changes that take place at the higher levels of the ontological and axiological. In almost any kind of democratic society, one of the fundamental ideas is that in order to be successful a person needs education, and higher education is seen by many as a powerful variable in the equation describing social ascent. Concerns caused by the all too rapid pace of technological change now seem to diminish hope for a predictable future, however, and the paradigm that hard work, coupled with educational stock, leads to social climbing now seems to be invalidated. Where countries are more developed and where income inequality seems to be a very important factor, things seem to be changing. Added to the equation of confidence, competence is ethical behavior, suggesting that in the current context it is no longer just a question of what you do, but also how you do it. In these circumstances, what is the value of education in contemporary European society?

Keywords: *Competence, digital competences, digital literacy, digital literacy, environmental education, early education and care, higher education, high-skilled work, NEET's, resilience.*

1. European Education Area (EHEA) - more resilient and inclusive education and training systems

Public spending on education is often regarded as one of the most important investments made in people. This is because education has the potential to play an essential role in socio-economic development.¹

In the current context of a globalized world², where a highly skilled workforce can be an advantage in terms of productivity, innovation and competitiveness, the issue of investment in education is of major interest.

This also explains the adoption by the European Council of the EU in 2021 of the Resolution aimed at *creating a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training*, which aims to:

- Improving quality and equity in education and training,
- Revaluing the teaching professions by providing high-quality initial education and professional development opportunities for all teachers, trainers and school leaders,
- Digital education,
- Environmental education,
- Strengthening international cooperation with countries and regions worldwide.

The strategy for creating the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training has resulted in the construction of seven structured targets with two time-bound milestones:

By 2025

- At least 60% of recent VET graduates should be exposed to workplace learning activities during their education and training,
- At least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning activities.

By 2030

- The share of low-achieving 5-year-olds in reading, math and science should be below 15%,

1 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Valences of Education", in *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 190-196.

2 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Globalization and its effect on religion", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, Mihnea Costoiu, Liviu-Bogdan Ciucă, Nelu Burcea (eds.), Les Arcs, France, Iarsic, 2014, vol.1,nr.1, pp.532-541.

- The share of low-achieving eighth graders in computer and information literacy should be below 15%,
- At least 96% of children between 3 years of age and the age for compulsory enrollment in primary school should participate in early education and care,
- The share of early leavers from education and training should be below 9%,
- At least 45% of 25-34 year olds should have a higher education qualification.

For the EU today, education plays a vital role in future strategies in the economic and social fields, and this Resolution responds to an almost systemic functional requirement in the field of education by setting a series of political objectives for the EEA, objectives which are intended, on the one hand, to promote collaboration between EU countries and, on the other hand, to monitor expected progress in an area considered strategic for the coming years:

a. Improving quality, equity, inclusion and achievement for all in education and training

(Today's world needs to cope with future transformations in society and the economy, and to thrive it needs the right knowledge, skills, competences and attitudes, with education³ and training essential for personal, civic and professional development).

b. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all.

(The specific challenges of the current socio-economic context affect the way we live and work, including the distribution of jobs and the demand for skills and competences. In this context, it is essential that education and training systems become more responsive to the demands of the future, addressing a more diverse group of learners and offering recognition and validation of prior learning, training opportunities for further training and retraining, including at higher qualification levels⁴ and

3 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Current Values of Education and Culture", în *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, August 15-16, 2021, Princeton, NJ, United States of America, pp. 87-92.

4 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Plea for Human Dignity", *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity*

throughout working life, supported by initiatives such as the European Universities and Centres of Vocational Excellence launched through the Erasmus+ programme).

c. Improving skills and motivation in the teaching profession

(To support innovation, inclusion, quality and outcomes in education and training, teachers, the core of education and training, need to be highly competent and motivated, and they in turn need a wide range of professional learning opportunities and support throughout their careers).

d. Strengthening European higher education

(EU higher education institutions in the next period should be encouraged to find new forms of cooperation by creating trans-national alliances, pooling knowledge and resources, stimulating research and innovation, including through the full implementation of the European Universities initiative).

e. Supporting the green and digital transition in and through education and training

(At the heart of the EU's agenda is the green and digital transition, which will have significant consequences for the transition to an environmentally, socially, economically and employment sustainable economy. Without ensuring that all citizens acquire the knowledge, competences, skills and attitudes needed to cope with these changes, a socially equitable transformation of the EU will be impossible).

2. European Year of Skills 2023 - boosting the social objectives of the Europe 2030 Strategy

The focus on lifelong learning ensures, against the backdrop of huge socio-economic change in the EU, that the needs of businesses, which are most aware of these needs, are matched with the aspirations of citizens, who are feeling the all too rapid pace of technological change.

The initiative aimed to give a new impetus to lifelong learning, enabling citizens and businesses to contribute to the green and digital transition, supporting innovation and competitiveness.

The program was also designed to achieve two of its social objectives which are part of the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*:

- Reaching the threshold that by 2030 at least 60% of adults participate each year in vocational training;
- Reaching a threshold of at least 78% of 20-64 year olds in employment by 2030.

In practical terms, by setting this headline target, the EU has committed itself to achieving a high and inclusive employment rate by 2030, while focusing on:

- ✦ Reduce the gender gap in employment by at least half compared to 2019;
- ✦ Increasing the provision of formal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, seeking to ensure a better work-life balance and encouraging women's participation in the labor market;
- ✦ Decrease the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) aged 15-29 from 12.6% (in 2019) to 9%, i.e. by improving their employment prospects.

The European Year of Skills 2023 sought to give a new impetus to lifelong learning by:

- Promote investment in training and further training to unlock the full potential of the European workforce and to support people in moving between jobs;
- Ensuring that skills are relevant to labor market needs;
- Matching people's aspirations and skills with labor market opportunities;
- Greater focus on activating more people for the labor market, particularly women and young people, especially those not in education, employment or training.
- Attract people from third countries with the skills needed in the EU.

3. Education and training - key role in a knowledge-based economy

The EU has already built the framework to enable EU countries to exchange best practices in order to:

- make lifelong learning and mobility a reality
- improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training,
- promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
- stimulate creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

In order to achieve the objectives set in the education and training framework, the EU implements comprehensive policies, trying to cover

all levels across the different education sectors (pre-school education and childcare, schools, vocational education and training, higher education, adult education).

The EU supports Member States in their efforts to provide the best education and training for their citizens, and is currently running a series of actions to increase skills and equip people with the skills they need to adapt to the job market:

- *European Agenda for Skills* - the framework for EU cooperation on skills;
- Structured dialogue with Member States on digital education and skills;
- Deployment of an EU Talent Pool and Talent Partnerships with selected third partners (key deliverable under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum).
- The New European Innovation Agenda - proposes a set of actions to create the right framework conditions for talent in the EU.
- *European Strategy for Universities* - proposes a series of 50 actions that are key to developing high-level and future-ready skills for a wide range of learners;
- *The European e-skills and jobs platform* - an initiative launched under the Connecting Europe Facility - provides information and resources on digital skills;
- *EU Coalition for Digital Skills and Jobs* - addresses the digital skills gap by bringing together Member States, social partners, businesses, non-profit organizations and education providers.

The EU also provides funding and assistance for investment in skills, as follows:

- The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), with a budget of over €99 billion for the period 2021-2027 - the EU's main instrument for investing in people;
- Recovery and resilience facilities to support Member States' reforms and investments, including in skills and jobs;
 - o In the National Recovery and Resilience Plans approved by the Commission and the Council, around 20% of social spending is dedicated to "employment and skills";
- Digital Agenda for Europe - €580 million to develop advanced digital skills;

- o It provides strategic funding and, among other things, supports the development of a skilled talent pool of digital experts, while increasing cooperation between EU Member States and stakeholders in the field of digital skills and jobs.
- Horizon Europe - supports skills for researchers, entrepreneurs and innovators;
 - o Marie Skłodowska-Curie, the European Innovation Council and the European Institute of Technology are well known.
- Erasmus+ - with a budget of €26.2 billion supports, among other things, the personal and professional development of learners, staff and institutions in vocational education and training by funding mobility activities and partnerships for cooperation across Europe.
 - o European universities that are pioneering the development of micro-accreditations for training, further training and retraining are also funded.

Within the paradigm shaping education and training, several additional programs involved in competence development can also be listed:

- InvestEU program,
- European Globalization Adjustment Fund for displaced workers,
- European Regional Development Fund,
- Just Transition Fund,
- European Solidarity Fund,
- Program for Environment and Climate Action (LIFE),
- Modernization Fund,
- Technical Support Instrument,
- Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument.

4. Tertiary education - a vital element of the long-term competitiveness strategy

Tertiary education, according to the EU Agenda for the Modernization of Higher Education in the European States, "...plays a crucial role in the advancement of individuals and society and in providing the highly skilled human capital and effective citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, growth and prosperity".

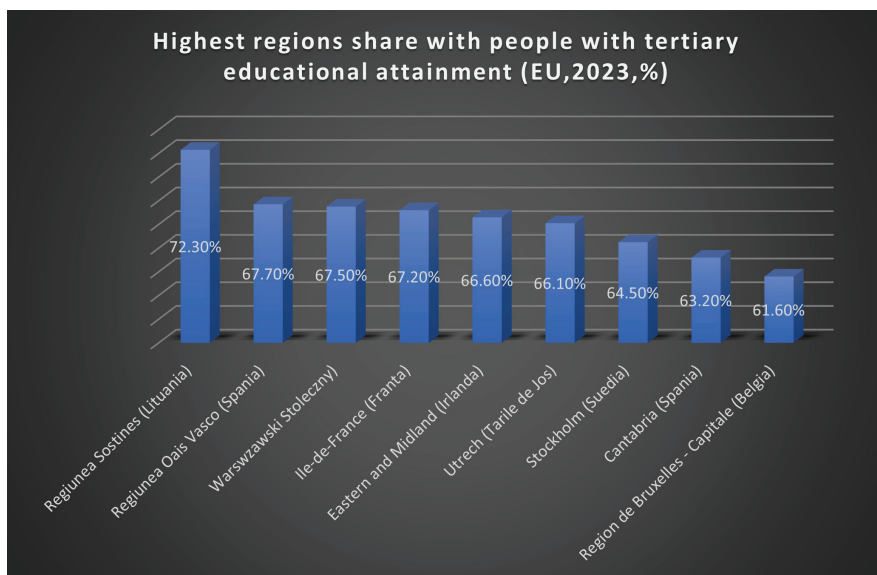
Higher education occupies a special position in the realization of the European Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA), but also in creating a sustainable and resilient economy and in developing a greener, more inclusive and digital society (according to Eurostat data 80% of recent tertiary graduates in the EU have obtained a job within less than 3 months of graduation).

This explains why EU Member States have set a target that by 2030, at least 45% of 25-34 year olds should have a higher education degree.

According to Eurostat data, in 2023, on average 43.1% of 25-34 year olds in the EU had a tertiary level of education. Also, in 2023, about 12.7% of the EU population aged 25-64 participated in education and training, with the highest share in Sweden's capital region of Stockholm, where the share was 41.3%.

As the table below shows, at regional level:

Tabelul nr 1: Highest regions share with people with tertiary educational attainment



Sources: Author

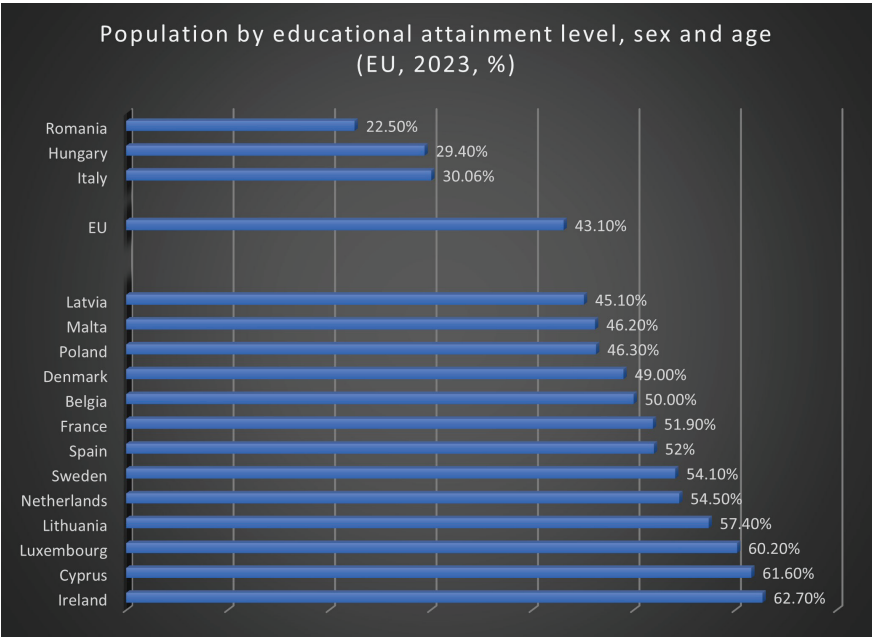
- The highest regional share and considerably above the EU average of 43.1% was in Lithuania's capital region of Sostines, where people aged 25-34 had a tertiary level of education of 72.3%;

- The regions of Oais Vasco (67.70%) and Cantabria (63.20%), both in Spain, are among the regions with very high shares of tertiary attainment;
- The Warszawazawski Stoleczny region in Poland ranks with a tertiary attainment share of 67.5% in the top three strongest European regions from this perspective;
- Ile-de-France (67.20%), Stockholm (64.50%) and Brussels (61.60%), the capital regions of France, Sweden and Belgium, also complete the picture of the strongest poles of tertiary attainment at regional level in the EU.

At national level, according to the data in Table 2:

- By 2023, 13 countries had already reached the 2030 target for the full realization of a European Education Area (at least 45% of 25-34 year olds had obtained a tertiary degree);

Tabelul nr 2: Population by educational attainment level, sex and age



Sources: Author

- The 13 countries are: Ireland (62.70%), Cyprus (61.60%), Luxembourg (60.20%), Lithuania (57.40%), the Netherlands (54.50%), Sweden (54.10%), Spain (52%) and France (51.90%),

Belgium (50%), Denmark (49%), Poland (46.30%), Malta (46.20%) and Latvia (45.10%);

- The EU's European Statistical Service notes that there is a gap between women and men aged 25-34 in tertiary education (49% of women had a university degree in 2023, compared to 38% of men);
- More than two-fifths of the EU population has a tertiary education;
- The lowest tertiary education shares were recorded in Romania (22.50%), Hungary (29.40%) and Italy (30.60%).

Conclusions:

- The EU understands the specific challenges of the current socio-economic context, which influences the way we live and work;
- There is a specific correlation between the distribution of jobs and the demand for new skills and competences;
- Given that the focus of the EU agenda will be on the green and digital transitions, there will be far-reaching consequences in terms of the transition to an environmentally, socially, economically and employment sustainable economy;
- In this context, it is essential that education and training systems become more responsive to the demands of the future, addressing a heterogeneous group of learners and offering recognition and validation of prior learning, training opportunities through further training and retraining, including at higher qualification levels and throughout working life;
- A higher number of tertiary graduates is important for sustainable and inclusive growth;
- Europe's adult population with tertiary education varies considerably across the continent, according to data available from Eurostat;
- In 2023, on average 43.1% of 25-34 year olds in the EU had a tertiary level of education;
- By the end of 2023, 13 countries had already reached the 2030 target - more than 45% of 25-34 year olds in the EU had tertiary education;

- In this ranking Romania ranks last, at the end of 2023 only 22.50% of the country's population had a tertiary level education.

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